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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

North Korean Political Strategy

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

North Korean Political Strategy

Introduction

Aggressive actions of the North Korean regime toward South Korea and the United States--exemplified by the capture of the Pueblo in January 1968 and the destruction of the EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in April 1969 [redacted]

[redacted]

Background

1. The seizure of the Pueblo in January 1968 and the attack on the US EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in April 1969 were acts of political warfare. They form a key element of Premier Kim Il-song's strategy for advancing three major objectives: in the North to solidify further his political position and to stir the population to greater economic efforts; in the South to undermine confidence in the government and to exacerbate its relations with the US; in relationship to the US, to capitalize on the US public's disenchantment with the burdens and risks of military commitments in Asia and ultimately to force a retrenchment in American commitments, particularly the withdrawal of US forces from Korea.

2. Kim Il-song has been quoted as saying, "The Vietnam war is crucial. The defeat of the United States in Vietnam will mark the end of American power in Asia." Kim's view closely parallels Maoist China's evident conviction that the Vietnamese Communists must impose a defeat on US policy that would force the US to retract its power and commitments in East Asia. This, they believe, would remove the principal barrier to the achievement of Chinese aspirations in Southeast Asia and to North Korean objectives in the South.

North Korean Pressure Tactics

3. The eagerness with which Kim Il-song has attempted to exploit the US involvement in Vietnam stems partly from North Korea's increasingly bleak prospects in competing with South Korea. Prior to the military coup in South Korea in May 1961, Pyongyang relied on propaganda and political subversion against the South and a high economic growth rate in the North to set the stage for eventual unification of the peninsula under a Communist regime. Time appeared to be on the side of the North [redacted] But throughout the 1960s, the South under President Pak's leadership

has outpaced the North in terms of both international standing and economic growth. The South's rate of economic growth has been double that of the North for most of the past decade; it is now increasing almost three times as fast. There is little prospect that the North can unaided revive its lagging economy and avoid falling even further behind.

4. South Korea's normalization treaty with Japan in 1965 also represented a major setback for the North. Pyongyang's efforts to forestall and discredit this agreement underscored its fear that the treaty, which provided for $800 million in Japanese economic assistance over a ten-year period, would lead to the re-establishment of strong Japanese influence in the South and would erect another formidable barrier to North Korea's long-term aim of extending its control over the entire peninsula.

5. Another reflection of Kim's decision that bold action was necessary to check South Korea's growing momentum and power was his abandonment of earlier proposals for the "peaceful reunification" of the country based on "democratic" elections. He has publicly set the goal of achieving unification "within our generation." In his October 1966 speech, Kim outlined a program for achieving this goal by stimulating a revolution of "patriotic forces" in the South which would unite with the North to expel US forces, overthrow the Seoul government, and establish a "peoples' government." He called for the development of a militant Communist party in the South to lead the revolution and to spearhead a broad anti-US "national salvation front."

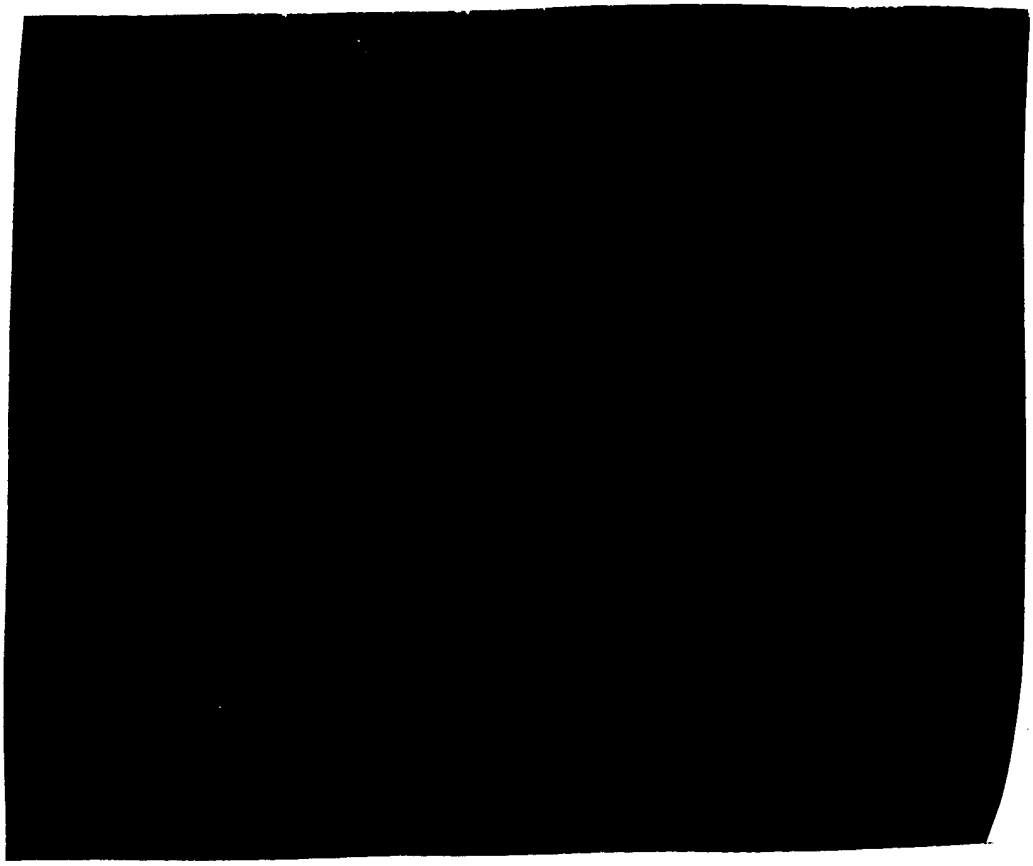
6. Kim has acknowledged that North Korea has no prospect of achieving unification as long as US forces remain in the South. The "supreme national task" facing the Korean people, he has declared, is to "drive the US imperialist aggressors from our soil" and to overthrow their "stooges" in Seoul. Until this task is accomplished, unification is "unthinkable."

[redacted]

The Pueblo Incident

10. As the US became even more heavily engaged in Vietnam, Kim evidently decided that he could stage

more risky provocations with relative impunity. The Blue House raid and the seizure of the Pueblo followed. The North Koreans clearly calculated that their possession of the Pueblo and its crew would exert an additional powerful deterrent against retaliatory action. Pyongyang took pains to draw attention to its leverage by threatening to try and punish the Pueblo crew.



13. The overriding aims of humiliating the US, generating public opposition in the US to American military activities in the Korean area, and obtaining visible evidence for the Korean people of "victory" over the US guided Pyongyang to press for a formal US apology throughout the eleven-month period of negotiations. After the release of the Pueblo crew, the North Koreans portrayed the document signed by the US representative as a "confession" of guilt, claimed that

North Korea had proved that a determined small nation could defeat a "mighty imperialist," and compared the US "humiliation" in the Pueblo affair to the "abject surrender" of the UN Command in the 1953 Korean armistice.

The EC-121 Incident

14. From the standpoint of advancing North Korean objectives against the US, the outcome of the EC-121 incident was a major disappointment for the Pyongyang regime. In contrast with the Pueblo affair, the initial uncertainty in international opinion about the location of the shootdown was quickly dispelled by the US and Soviet search operations 90 miles from the Korean coast and by President Nixon's announcement that both North Korean and Soviet radar tracking confirmed that the aircraft had never been closer than 40 miles to North Korean territory.

15. Pyongyang never overcame this inauspicious beginning. Its propaganda media devoted unusually light coverage to the incident, and much of this was geared to supporting domestic goals of the regime. The government withheld a formal pronouncement until five days after President Nixon had announced the resumption of reconnaissance flights under protection. The defensive tone of Pyongyang's statement indicated that the regime was well aware of its weak international position. It made a feeble attempt to link the EC-121 with the Pueblo and to arouse opposition to US activities by claiming there was no "guarantee" that continuing US reconnaissance flights "will not intrude again." Aside from a North Vietnamese expression of support and lukewarm, pro forma Soviet support, North Korea's isolation was complete. It was forced to resort to private appeals to its allies and friends abroad for some gestures of support.

16. North Korea's eight-day delay in issuing a formal statement on the EC-121 incident apparently was prompted not only by the regime's awareness of its vulnerable propaganda position but also by a

desire to play for time in which to assess US intentions in deploying Task Force 71 to the Sea of Japan. [redacted]

Outlook

17. Kim Il-song's taste for risky ventures is sometimes attributed to wishful thinking and delusions of grandeur as a revolutionary leader. But these personal characteristics, however important, probably are less influential in shaping his decisions than the hard and unpromising facts of North Korea's objective situation and Kim's perception of opportunities to alter these conditions to his advantage. The North Korean Government is not only losing ground in the contest for power and prestige to an increasingly prosperous South Korea, but lacking any firm assurance of military protection and direct support in crisis situations from the USSR and China--support that would counterbalance the US role in the South--it confronts a highly uncertain future.

18. There is little prospect that Kim will abandon the political strategy that produced the Pueblo and EC-121 incidents. From Pyongyang's vantage point, neither the urgent pressures of competing with the South nor exploitable opportunities abroad have diminished. Even if the next year or so should witness a settlement in Vietnam or substantial reductions in the level of combat and the number of US forces involved, it is unlikely that such developments in themselves would bring a marked shift in North Korea's present policy. Much would depend on Kim's interpretation of the outcome in Vietnam, particularly its bearing on future American military posture and intentions throughout East Asia.

19. There are additional factors, both domestic and foreign, that will probably encourage Kim to persist in his tactics against South Korea and

the US. In the first place, Kim's deep personal commitment to a program of maximum military preparedness, described as "fortification of the whole country," and to the goal of reunification "within our generation" has generated a powerful momentum across the entire range of North Korean policies. [redacted] His public demands for unquestioning and unconditional acceptance of his decisions and constant agitation to instill militant discipline in the population will make it difficult for Kim to reverse course over a short period of time. In addition, Kim Il-song, like Mao, relies heavily on the domestic tension and hatred generated by an "aggressive US imperialism" to motivate his people and to keep a social revolution alive in a nation where ancient attitudes die hard. Such tension and hatred must be fed periodically by fresh "evidence."

20. The political crisis in the South over amending the constitution to permit President Pak to run for a third term will be a strong incentive for the North Koreans to intensify infiltration and subversive operations. They may be tempted to exaggerate the opportunities for disruption presented by recent student demonstrations in Seoul protesting the third-term amendment. It was the students, after all, who spearheaded the drive to overthrow the Syngman Rhee regime in 1960.

21. Pyongyang, however, faces a dilemma in trying to exploit South Korean political unrest. A sharp upsurge in pressure and subversion would not only invite harsh repressive action by the Seoul government but would impair the North's ability to take advantage of the sentiment for early reunification among student and intellectual groups in the South. Such action could, indeed, backfire and improve Pak's third-term prospects. The great majority of South Koreans could well regard a sharp rise in the threat from the North as a compelling argument for keeping Pak in office.

22. The limitations on the North's ability to intervene effectively in South Korean politics, combined with its poor chances for developing guerrilla bases and significant political support in the countryside, may prompt Pyongyang to concentrate its main attention on harassing actions against the US presence and attempting to shake South Korean confidence in US protection. In addition to further attacks on US ships or aircraft that may offer targets of opportunity, the North Koreans may attempt provocations against US personnel and installations in the South. [redacted]

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